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RQ-21A Blackjack begins operational test phase

An RQ-21A Blackjack is launched at a test range in Boardman, Oregon, early December 2013 during the Navy and Marine Corps acceptance testing. The system is the first low-rate initial production lot to be produced by industry partner Insitu Inc. The system will begin initial operational test and evaluation this month at Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms, Calif. (Photo courtesy Insitu Inc.)

NAVAL AIR SYSTEMS COMMAND, PATUXENT RIVER, Md. – The Navy and Marine Corps' newest small unmanned aircraft system RQ-21A Blackjack began its initial operational test and evaluation (IOT&E) in early January at Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms, Calif.

As part of IOT&E, this first low-rate initial production (LRIP) lot of the Blackjack, previously known as RQ-21A Small Tactical Unmanned Aircraft System (STUAS), will demonstrate the system's effectiveness and suitability in realistic combat conditions.

"Receiving the first production-level Blackjack is a great accomplishment for our government and industry team," said Col. James Rector, program manager for the Navy and Marine Corps STUAS program office, who oversees the RQ-21A program. "It is a very capable system that will meet the needs of our warfighters deployed on land or at sea with our Marine expeditionary units."

The Insitu Inc.-built Blackjack is a larger twin-tailed follow-on to the ScanEagle unmanned

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air vehicle. The system contains five air vehicles, two ground control systems, and launch and recovery equipment.

Air Test and Evaluation Squadron (VX) 1 is conducting ground and shipboard testing on Blackjack for the next several months. After completing IOT&E, the government and Insitu team will transition the system to Marine Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Squadron (VMU) 2, located at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, N.C. for operational use. A second LRIP lot, consisting of one system, is scheduled for delivery in the spring.

Lt. Col. Anthony Bolden, commanding officer for VMU-2, said the myriad of capabilities that come with the introduction of Blackjack will provide the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) with a platform that has the payload and persistence to significantly enhance situational awareness.

“RQ-21A brings a new level of flexibility and expeditionary capability not present in any UAS to date,” Bolden said. “As a result, having and operating the Blackjack will posture the Marine UAV squadrons at the forefront of MAGTF operations.”

At eight feet long and with a wingspan of 16 feet, Blackjack provides intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance and communications relay to the warfighter on land and at sea. The air vehicle’s open-architecture configuration can integrate new payloads quickly and can carry sensor payloads as heavy as 25 pounds.

Standard payloads include day and night full-motion video cameras, an infrared marker, a laser range finder, a communications relay package and automatic identification system receivers.

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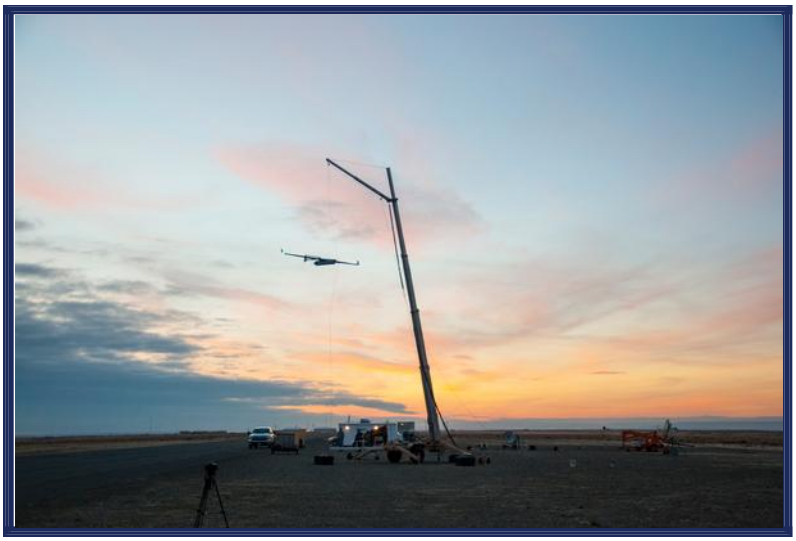

Navy and Marine Corps team recover a RQ-21A Blackjack during acceptance testing in early December 2013 at a range in Boardman, Oregon. (Photo courtesy Insitu Inc.)